
Technical Writing

Sentence Structure

Examples: Patterns, Strengths, and Pitfalls



Choose sentence structures that make technical content accurate, usable, and safe to act on



Balance clarity, precision, and scannability against completeness and safety caution



Cover core patterns, best uses, pitfalls, domain examples, and revision strategies



Judge every sample by reader task, sentence function, and risk of ambiguity



Why Sentence Structure Drives Technical Clarity



Structure controls whether readers act safely and correctly



Reader variables: expertise, language proficiency, time pressure, screen size, assistive technology



Clarity signals: one main action, explicit subjects, short subject-verb distance



Weak structure causes wrong procedure order and dangerous ambiguity

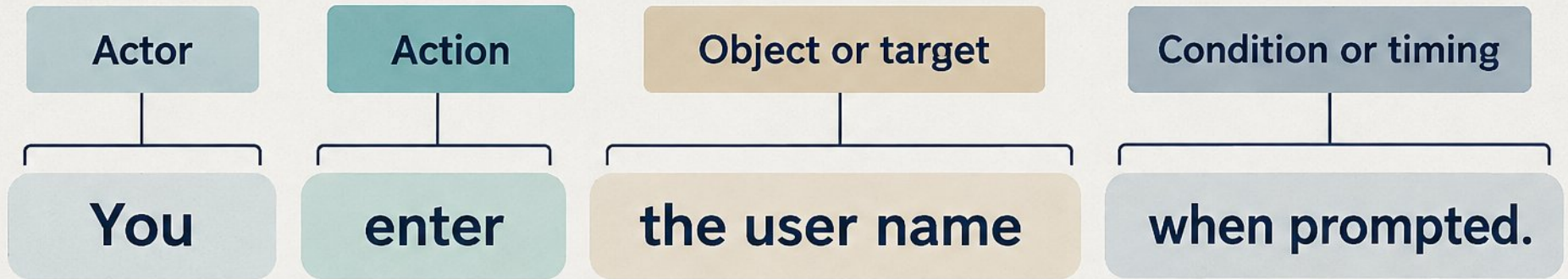


Missed conditions create support escalations and safety risk



Seeing the Structure:

Anatomy of a Technical Sentence



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- Four slots to identify: actor, action, object or target, condition or timing
 - Procedures tell the reader to do something; descriptions explain how something works
 - Imperative steps imply the actor is "you": "Enter the user name."
 - Diagnostic habit: cannot name actor and action in one pass? Fix the structure.

Core Sentence Patterns for Instructions and Explanations

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WRITING
STRONGER
UNDERSTANDING

1. Imperative

Imperative: start with the action verb — “Remove the cover.”

Action verb

Remove

the cover.

2. Subject-verb-object

Subject-verb-object: use when the actor or tool must be explicit — “The API returns a 200 response.”

Subject

The API

Verb

returns

Object

a 200 response.

3. Condition-result

Condition-result: place the condition first — “If the motor does not start, check the power connection.”

Condition

If the motor
does not start,

Result

check the power
connection.

4. Cause-effect

Cause-effect: make the mechanism visible — “Because the pH dropped below 7, the solution turns yellow.”

Cause

Because the pH
dropped below 7,

Effect

the solution
turns yellow.

5. Definition

Definition and comparison: state the category, then line up parallel elements to make differences scannable.

Category

A sensor is

Definition

a device that
detects a physical
quantity.

6. Comparison

Item 1

A sensor
measures a
physical quantity.

Item 2

A controller
regulates a
physical quantity.

Choosing a Pattern: Reader Task, Risk, and Content Type

- Selection test: what must the reader do or know?
- Risk drives form: low-risk explanation vs. high-risk warning
- Troubleshooting steps default to condition-first, imperative structures
- Sentence length limits: 20 words for a step, 25 for running text
- One main action or topic per sentence aids translation memory reuse

 Reader Task	 Risk Level	 Content Type
 Understand a concept	 Low risk	 Explanation
 Follow steps	 Moderate risk	 Troubleshooting steps
 Avoid a hazard	 High risk	 Warning

Strengths of Specific Structures: When They Work Best



Active voice with explicit actors reduces ambiguity in maintenance and safety steps

The filter should be checked regularly.



Technicians should check the filter regularly.



Parallel structure speeds scanning in lists, tables, and warnings

Check the filter, to clean the housing, and replace the seal.



Check the filter, clean the housing, and replace the seal.



Short single-action sentences work best under time pressure

In order to proceed with the next step, you should press the button now.



Press the button now.



Subordinated sentences suit idea relationships, not isolated facts

Because the area was slippery, the team used a different route.



The team used a different route because the area was slippery.



Topic sentences and known-new flow aid explanatory coherence

The equipment is reliable. It requires regular inspection.



The equipment is reliable, but it requires regular inspection.



Vary sentence length and openings to avoid mechanical prose

The system works. The system is efficient. The system is safe.



The system works well, it is efficient, and above all, it keeps people safe.

The Case for Passive Voice: Legitimate Uses in Technical Content



Passive voice is a tool, not a defect;
use it deliberately.



Actor unknown or irrelevant?
“Tokens are rotated every 24 hours.”



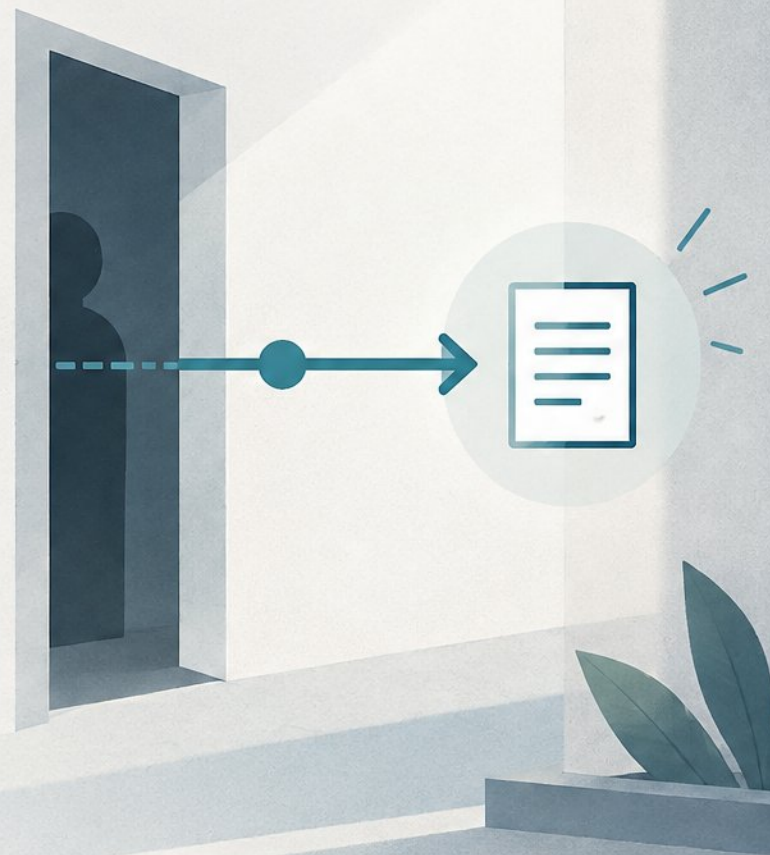
Formal results favor passive:
“The latency was measured at the gateway level.”



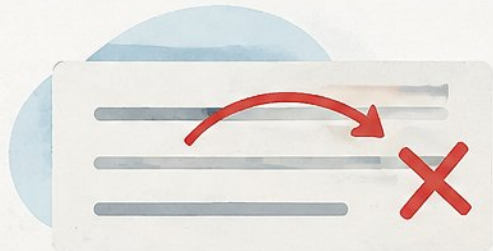
Call-and-response:
“Click Submit. Your changes are saved.”



Editing test:
if the actor matters to act, switch to active.



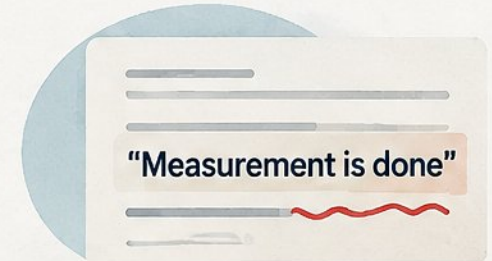
Common Pitfalls: Ambiguity, Misplaced Modifiers, and Nominalizations



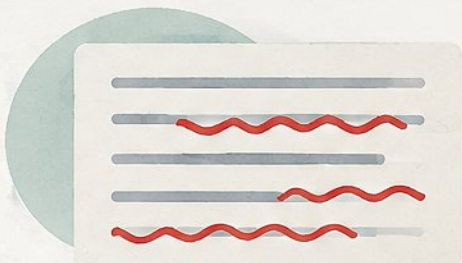
- Misplaced modifiers attach actions to the wrong actor



- Faulty parallelism mixes grammatical forms in lists and steps



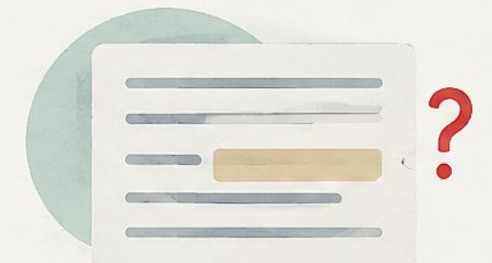
- Nominalizations hide who does what: "Measurement is done"



- Overloaded sentences stack conditions, exceptions, and warnings



- Orphan "this" leaves multi-object procedures unreadable

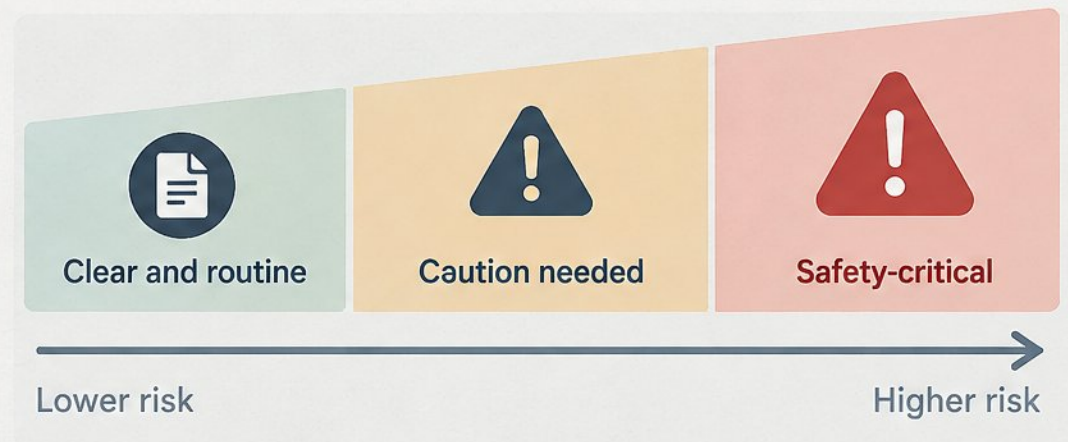


- Vague quantifiers make requirements unverifiable and untranslatable



Safety-Critical Sentences: Conditions, Consequences, and Prohibitions

- Separate hazard, consequence, and avoidance action from procedure steps
- Put the condition first when it scopes the action: “Before you remove the disk, unmount the file system”
- Use “must” deliberately: allowed in safety-critical steps, not paired with imperatives
- State prohibitions plainly so readers recognize risk without re-reading
- Never bury a warning inside a long procedure sentence



Domain Examples: Software, Hardware, and Scientific Writing

Software



Weak

"A 200 response is returned."



Revised

"The API returns a 200 response."

Structural fix

Rewrite passive API text.

Hardware



Weak

"Before you remove the disk, unmount the file system."



Revised

"Before you remove the disk, unmount the file system."

Structural fix

Condition-first imperatives.

Scientific



Weak

"The latency was measured at the gateway level."



Revised

"The latency was measured at the gateway level."

Structural fix

Restrained passive for methods.



- Each example: compare weak vs. revised, then name the structural fix.
- Same content shifts with risk level and audience.

Revision Strategies: Editing Sentences Without Losing Meaning

CLEARER WRITING
GREATER IMPACT



Diagnostic pass

name the actor, action, condition, and object



Decomposition

split overloaded sentences, keep logic and safety intact



Reordering

move conditions, exceptions, and time cues first



Parallelism pass

align lists, headings, warnings, table entries



Voice pass

choose active or passive by reader task



Verification pass

confirm standards, terminology, and legal requirements



Guided Walkthrough: Six Before-and-After Rewrites



1 Passive to active

Before "Back up the database before migration."



After "Back up the database before migration."

2 Nominalization to verb

Before "The clonic phase begins when..."



After "The clonic phase begins when..."

3 Condition first

Before "If pressure is below 0.2 MPa, replace the filter."



After "If pressure is below 0.2 MPa, replace the filter."

4 Modifier closer

Before "...a technical writer who works with FrameMaker..."



After "...a technical writer who works with FrameMaker..."

5 Orphan "this"

Before "this": replace with the actual noun.



After "this": replace with the actual noun.

6 Safety split

Before "pull the hazard into its own warning block."



After "pull the hazard into its own warning block."

Practice Lab: Rewrite and Evaluate Real Sentences

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Activity 1:

name the pattern and
purpose of sample
instructions



Activity 2:

rewrite ambiguous,
non-parallel,
nominalized sentences



Activity 3:

compare rewrites;
weigh clarity, length,
precision



Activity 4:

score against rubric —
action, condition,
parallelism, terms

Sentence Anatomy (for reference)

Action

Condition

Parallelism

Terms

A clear, well-structured sentence

Rubric Criteria

- ☐ Action
- ☐ Condition
- ☐ Parallelism
- ☐ Terms



Debrief: log recurring pitfalls, preferred patterns for the style guide

Takeaways, Standards, and Next Steps



Choose structure by reader task, risk, and content type — not habit



One main action per sentence; conditions before actions; parallel list forms



Watch for modifiers, nominalizations, overloaded sentences, vague reference



Consult plain-language, controlled-language, and translation-oriented standards



Apply the revision checklist to one high-impact procedure; review with an editor

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LANGUAGE

PersonWise.

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Scan the code or click anywhere to watch this course live, with voice Q&A

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